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Letters: City of the future that never was

Thursday 10 February 2011 01:00 |

It is true that, as Chris Beanland tells us ("Roads to nowhere", 8 February), Leeds once branded itself as the "Motorway City of the Seventies"; anyone who received mail from Leeds will have seen that slogan on the postmark. But that's not all.

The great plan at the time was for the city-centre streets to be handed over to cars at ground level. Pedestrians were to be banished to a network of walkways at first-floor level. For some years any new buildings in the city centre had to incorporate a section of walkway, with the intention that in due course all these detached sections would be joined up.



Eventually saner counsels prevailed, and the boot is now on the other foot, with vehicles excluded from large parts of the city centre. The "Metropolis" approach has had its day, and such bits of walkway as were built have mostly been demolished.

John Smurthwaite, Leeds

How the people beat the planners

Chris Beanland's interesting read took us back to a time 40 years ago when planning attitudes towards people were very different from today. One quite important fact was omitted: the reasoning that led to the cancellation of the London motorway box project.

Appalled at motorway blight, a movement called Homes Before Roads emerged and stood many candidates at the 1971 Greater London Council elections. It took enough Tory votes to allow labour to regain control of the GLC.

Edward Heath's Conservative government (two years before the miners' strike) privately considered the issue a general election loser and duly cancelled the project, using the public excuse of unsustainable rising costs.

Foulness/Maplin airport was cancelled at about the same time for ostensibly the same reason. Boris Johnson wants to use artificial islands in the Thames estuary for an airport; why not revive the 1960s plans, which have to be more economically viable than constructing artificial islands and rail and road tunnel access?

Richard Dawes, London N7

The news that Oxford and Cambridge universities are likely to charge the full £9,000 a year fees stirs up the possibility of considerable undergraduate disgruntlement.

If I were a student on a subsidised science or engineering course, I would feel miffed that some of my £9,000 was going to subsidise the governmentally unappreciated arts and humanities students – now apparently regarded by the Coalition as drones. If I were an unappreciated arts or humanities student I would feel miffed that my engineering or science fellow students were subsidised, and therefore presumably receiving a higher quality of teaching than myself.

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Predicting how Chelsea vs Sevilla will play out tonight

Frank Donald, Edinburgh

As the top universities such as Oxford and Cambridge grab the maximum permitted fees of £9,000, with lesser universities charging less, the top universities will be able to invest and improve faster than the lesser universities, and the gulf between the standards of the top institutions and the rest will get wider and wider.

It's all part of Cameron's vision for increasing the gap between rich and poor, to ensure that the rich retain all their privileges and keep their hold on the top jobs and that it becomes harder and harder for those in the middle and at the bottom of society to bridge the gap.

Rob Michaels, Bournemouth

Cambridge is set to charge £9,000 a year for tuition. The system is recaptured by the wealthy and we return to pre-war conditions. Truly, I was fortunate to live in a time of enlightened dreams.

Derek Brundish (BA Cantab), Horsham, West Sussex

Professor Alan Hibbert (letter, 7 February) is "tired of year 12 students saying they cannot afford university fees". While it is true that they will not have to pay the fees up-front, surely they are expressing anxiety about starting their careers with debts of at least £30,000, excluding living expenses?

It is astonishing that the Government is so relaxed about personal debt, a contributory factor to the current malaise. Germany, by far Europe's most successful economy, has household debt as a proportion of disposable income about 40 per cent lower than the UK. University fees in Germany are a fraction of even current UK levels.

The new arrangements for university funding would dramatically increase personal debt if student numbers remain consistent. Fewer students from less wealthy backgrounds will attend university. The Coalition will find that its professed aims to enhance social mobility and boost UK competitiveness will both suffer as a result.

Simon Sweeney, The York Management School, University of York

Professor Hibbert should be a little more understanding of year 12 students when they say they cannot afford to go to university. It is legitimate for these students to question whether it is a good investment. They will be entering an exceptionally competitive job market, with average starting salaries stagnating.

Many of my friends who graduated last year have yet to find employment, and are struggling with large debts. It is another myth that continued education at university is necessarily the most worthwhile future for year 12 students.

James Leigh, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

Wrong message to UK Muslims

When I first went to the UK in 2000 for my PhD degree, I found Britain a free land where I enjoyed absolute liberty to observe my religious practices and to engage in open discussion on what my religion stands for. I made friends with atheists, liberals, conservatives, and with people from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. Such openness and plurality gathered momentum through the state policy of multiculturalism.

With this experience, I was not prepared for Prime Minister David Cameron's criticism of multiculturalism and for what he said about Muslims at the Munich Security Conference. Mr Cameron did not mention the anti-Islam provocation of the English Defence league, and put the entire blame on "Islamic extremism".

Imagine you are a British Muslim living in Luton, where the EDL is organising the largest ever anti-Islam demonstration. Being a potential target of the EDL, your mind is gripped with fear and intimidation. And imagine that on the same day your Prime Minister is giving a significant speech on the issue of security but totally omits to touch on your anxiety, panic and sense of insecurity.

Multiculturalism has given Britain the beauty of a rainbow. Disregarding the values of multiculturalism could make Britain a hostile place for many to live.

Mr Cameron fetishised the symptoms of the problem and failed to address the root causes. Putting the entire onus on the Muslims and letting loose the English Defence League members to chant "Allah, Allah, who the fuck is Allah?" does not give the right message across British society. Such slogans and the silence of the Prime Minister about them are some of the reasons that make some young Muslims angry and desperate. I hope Mr Cameron will be more careful in future before making such important speeches.

Dr M Mahmudul Hasan, Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (7 February) claimed that David Cameron's speech in Munich can be summed up as follows: Muslims are not wanted.

What he actually said was that our hard-won human rights, and our legislature, are not to be trumped by the mores and practices of various religions. He also made the point that if a white western political movement tried to gain a support base here while espousing some of the less savoury views regularly associated with Islam, they would be branded fascistic. Yasmin herself would almost certainly be in the vanguard of those denouncing their agenda.

I believe this country has gone a long way towards shaking off racism. What many in Britain object to is a lack of integration on the part of some minorities. We don't want people to go home; we want them to join in. We also want them to accept, and benefit from, our system of democracy and human rights. What we don't want are attempts, by some, to change us from within.

Phil Edwards, Godalming, Surrey

John Redman (letter, 7 February) asserts that the Koran gives a resounding "No" to universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and the people's right to elect their own government. He infers from this that Muslim groups are not in favour of any of these.

I fear he could say the same of the Bible, and on that basis claim that all Jews and Christians must be opposed to these principles, which would be palpably untrue. What matters is how Muslims and adherents of other faiths and philosophies interpret their beliefs in the present day.

Sydney Norris, London SW14

Happy with AV in Australia

I was interested to note the claim by Messrs Brown, Lundberg, Cox and Wilson (letter, 9 February) that the alternative vote gives minority parties electoral leverage without democratic accountability.

In Australia, with AV, we have always had a level of democratic accountability – we call it an election. And elections seem to make quite clear what the intentions of political parties and candidates are.

In the last general election in Britain, it was almost impossible to discern what political intentions were, or, indeed, what either of the two parties in the Coalition were going to do in government. In fact, it was never clear whether the Lib Dems and the Conservatives were indeed going to work in coalition. Australian voters, on the other hand, have always had a clearer idea of what they are voting for. AV appears to work for them.

As for the claim that smaller parties can barter with larger parties in return for policy concessions, this is the nature of politics. The claim that smaller parties should be heard but transparently, after receiving a mandate raises the question of how the writers can justify a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, both with low parliamentary numbers, forming a government and, in at least one instance of Lib Dem policy, performing a complete U-turn when in power on policies which formed a major part of their electoral platform.

Michael Rolfe, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands

There probably is no perfect voting system, but first-past-the-post must be the worst. Who can agree to a system which allows someone to represent an area when most people in the area have voted against them?

With complete proportional representation the idea of voting for a person to represent the constituency is not possible. At least with AV the constituency is maintained, the representative is supported by a majority of people and it makes tactical voting for your second choice unnecessary.

Harry Punter, York

Your correspondents are clearly unconvinced about AV. It needs to be asked if changes in the voting system will make any difference when all the major parties seem to be abdicating responsibility for the common good. United in pursuing the expediency of realpolitik, is there any difference between them? If there was, voting reform might have some relevance.

L J Atterbury, Szydlowo, Poland

The experience of schizophrenia

Congratulations to Henry Cockburn and his father for their forthcoming book, *Henry's Demons* ("Why my son's story needed to be told", 5 February).

It promises to be a very moving and welcome addition to the growing body of writing by those diagnosed with schizophrenia, such as Anthony Scally's *Eyebrows and Other Fish*, and the collections of personal narratives written by people living with and recovering from psychotic illness, many of which are published as part of the work of the recovery networks in the UK and abroad.

All of these further the understanding of what it is like to experience schizophrenia, help to break down stereotypes and reduce stigma, and give voice to people who have often been ignored and misunderstood. Patrick Cockburn is right: Henry's Demons will be "unique in its description of mental illness" – everyone's account of their mental illness is unique.

He also suggests, though, that even people who have recovered from schizophrenia cannot "fully understand and describe what it is like for somebody who still has it". An increasing number of people with schizophrenia (and other illnesses) are able to access peer support programmes through which they are helped by others with a similar diagnosis precisely because these people do remember what it was like.

Fanet Laverick, Jane Andrew, Perth

Reasons not to get married

I am sure that we are all delighted that Mary Dejevsky has been happily married for many years. However, that seems to be a poor reason for taking a bullying tone with those who choose to cohabit ("If you want the benefits of marriage, take the plunge", 4 February).

Research shows clearly that it is the stability and duration of a relationship that matters in regard to the welfare of children, not the title used to describe the relationship. The assumption that marriage is intrinsically better than cohabitation becomes ludicrous when applied to second, third or fourth marriages – clearly the couple with 40 years of cohabiting are providing a better family home than the serially married.

Marriage takes place for a range of different reasons; the same applies to living together. Here are three examples that I know of, in which marriage was inappropriate: a couple with different religious beliefs; out of respect for a Catholic spouse who does not wish to divorce; the widow who thinks it's unfair for the children of her previous marriage to have to deal with a new one. There will be many more – not that anybody should feel the need to justify their actions in this area to Mary Dejevsky.

Carolyn Thompson, Batcombe, Somerset

How furious are you?

Now that even the banks profess to be "livid", another major step of the Big Society's vision of inclusivity has been achieved. I think we can safely say that, between them, all three major parties have now succeeded in

Perhaps the quango tasked with measuring our degree of happiness could usefully be redirected to explore the level of fury throughout the land, with a scale of 1 to 10.

1. Faintly Irritated (banks, at having to fork out anything after those payments to Tory Party funds).
2. Rather Cross (rich mothers losing child benefit).
3. Quietly Desperate (pensioners, savers, small businesses).
4. Fit to Bust (anyone dealing with a service provider or government department).
5. Outraged (trades unions and public service workers, charities).
6. Seething (the armed forces).
7. On the Streets (Peaceful) (librarians, rambblers).
8. On the Streets (Smash it Up) (students, anarchists, police).
9. Furious, Terrified, Desperate (everyone not yet mentioned).
- 10 Apoplectic (universal response to any mention of bank bonuses, bankers excepted).

We really are all in this together – the question is, how are we going to get out of it?

Sierra Hutton-Wilson, Evercreech, Somerset

Public principles

In your report on whether prisoners should get the vote ("MPs rebel over giving the vote to prisoners", 9 February), you observe that,"Many Labour MPs oppose votes for prisoners in principle, believing the public are hostile." This is what we in the philosophy trade call a non sequitur: it does not follow from the fact that the public are hostile that giving prisoners the right to vote is in principle wrong.

Phillip Cole, Professor of Applied Philosophy, University of Wales, Newport

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is going to slap £800m on the bank levy. Does he not realise that Bob Diamond doesn't get out of bed for that sort of money?

Tom S Birch, London WC1

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